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SUBJECT: YOM KIPPUR RIOTS IN THE MIXED CITY OF AKKO

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 8, at the beginning of the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, the drive of an Arab resident of the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Akko (Acre) into the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of "Ben Gurion" became the proximate cause for riots between the two communities for more than 24 hours. A large police deployment contained the violence, and there was no loss of life. Simmering tensions in this mixed city have outed opportunists from both ends of the political spectrum, who are only too glad to use inflammatory rhetoric, and forced the cancellation of a planned theatre festival. Minister of Public Security Avi Dichter visited Akko on October 10 to praise the police and to promise to put rioters behind bars. He said he regretted statements made by public figures and MK's, both Jewish and Arab, whose remarks have inflamed tempers in Akko and beyond. End Summary

¶2. (U) Most orthodox Jews observe the weekly Sabbath on Saturday and Jewish holidays by refraining from driving vehicles, and it is customary throughout the country for all Israeli citizens - save emergency medical and security personnel - to refrain from driving on Yom Kippur (and the evening before the holiday when observance begins). This is the quietest day of the year when most Jews fast and attend synagogue, and others navigate on foot or on bicycles. Periodically, there are reports of attacks against drivers -- no matter what their religious identity and often despite their emergency mission -- who violate these norms. This most often occurs when someone enters neighborhoods where religious observance is customary, such as the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. But the tension is often acute in mixed neighborhoods or cities where religious identity and observance are most apt to collide. For example, on Yom Kippur in 2007 a 20-year-old Israeli-Arab man ran over and killed a 9-year-old Jewish girl while she was riding her bicycle in the northern town of Kfar Tavor.

¶3. (SBU) Tawfik Jamal's drive into the Ben Gurion neighborhood of Akko touched off riots for a number of reasons, some real and others imagined. The initial facts of the event that touched off the riot are in dispute. Akko Arabs maintain that Mr. Jamal was returning by vehicle to his family's residence in the mixed Ben Gurion neighborhood where his vehicle was attacked by Jewish residents who were reportedly waiting to respond to any perceived provocation with violence. According to Galilee Police spokesman Eran Shak, who is quoted in the Jerusalem Post, Mr. Jamal was brazenly violating norms by driving his car and blaring music from it.

¶4. (SBU) Mr. Jamal and fellow passenger fled and hid in the family's house. According to Ahmad Odeh, an Akko city council member from Hadash Party who is running for mayor this November, the whole residential building of Jamal's family that included another two Arab families was consequently surrounded by a large number of Jewish residents from around 10:00 pm until 2:00 am on October 9 when the police finally managed to rescue the Arab families and take them to their relatives outside the neighborhood. Rumors purporting that the surrounded Arab families had been seriously harmed or killed quickly circulated in the Old City of Akko, which is mostly inhabited by Arab residents. Arab residents reportedly headed for Ben Gurion neighborhood and caused extensive damage to vehicles and storefronts.

¶5. (U) Israeli National Police dispatched hundreds of police to

Akko to disperse rioters on October 8. They remained in the city throughout Yom Kippur and were on hand the following evening (October 9), when Jewish groups gathered at the entrance of the Old City to stage a demonstration. Some of these demonstrators reportedly tried to cross police lines, without success. On the afternoon of October 10, there were reports that the home of another Arab family in the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Manshyeh has been surrounded by Jewish residents.

¶6. (SBU) Odeh said that what happened is an unfortunate event but was just an excuse for the Jewish residents to inflame the situation and prevent Arab residents from buying houses in mostly Jewish neighborhoods. Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab minority Rights in Israel, has scheduled a hearing at the Supreme Court of Israel on October 27 against the new Akko city law that will ban Arab businesses from opening on Saturdays in a predominantly Arab neighborhood in Akko.

¶7. (SBU) A senior Embassy FSN noted that Akko is a poor city, both for Jews and Arabs, making confrontation that much easier to spark given the numbers of disenchanted people on all sides. Arab members of the Knesset reacted strongly, with one member reportedly making references to these events as "Jewish pogroms." Right-wing Jewish MK's from the National Union and other parties blamed the Arabs for inflaming the situation. Minister of Public Security Avi Dichter visited the city on October 10 and promised to put rioters behind bars. He said he regretted statements made by public figures and MK's, both Jewish and Arab, and said these remarks inflamed tempers.

¶8. (U) The two days of riots/demonstrations led the Mayor of Akko, Shimon Lankry (Kadima), to cancel the "fringe theatre" festival

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planned for the upcoming Sukkot holiday next week. The Chair of the Knesset Interior Committee, MK Ophir Pines-Paz (Labor), reportedly went on the radio to urge reconsideration of this decision. He announced plans to hold an emergency Knesset meeting to discuss the Akko situation.

CUNNINGHAM